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THE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF GABRIEL TARDE.

GABRIEL TARDE, the French sociologist, is rapidly gaining in popularity, both in his own country and abroad. An attempt to consider the value of his contribution to the advancement of social science may, therefore, be found worthy of interest. Such an attempt has not yet been made, Tarde's theories on "imitation" having until now been discussed only in a fragmentary way, and in connection with the particular points of view of competing conceptions.

The man who is now regarded as the most prominent leader of the French sociological school, and to whom his countrymen, after many years of somewhat envious distrust, are at last doing justice, is a self-made scholar, grown up in solitude and self-communion, far removed from any contact with the powerful university and academic conventicles of the French metropolis. The greater part of his life has been spent in an obscure corner of France, at Sarlat (Dordogne). There he was born in 1843, and there he remained, after having completed his studies, for nearly eighteen years, on account of his professional duties of *juge d'instruction*. He began to contribute to Ribot's *Revue philosophique* in 1880-81. At that time the infatuation of sociologists for the Spencerian conceptions, however misapprehended, was at its height. The metaphor of the "social organism" was the motto of the day. After his *début*, the unknown magistrate from Sarlat took a firm stand against the dominant doctrine, according to which sociology was called upon to ascertain the substantial identity of social and biological facts. He claimed, on the contrary, that the rising science ought to aim at determining the differential element of social phenomena. On this solid basis Tarde gradually built up his theory of social life in a series of suggestive papers, and finally gave it out in the *Lois de l'imitation*, published in 1890.

Through this fascinating book Tarde has won fame even beyond the field of specialists, the originality of his views being such as to strike the fancy of sociological *dilettanti*. But the importance of his work goes farther and deeper. If we carefully look through the whole series of his writings, so as to grasp the ultimate meaning and to appreciate the remotest consequences of his speculations, we may be able fully to recognize the fact that Tarde has succeeded in bringing together the elements for one of the most fruitful conceptions of social life that has ever appeared in the history of philosophy.

I.

According to Tarde, social intercourse in its essential nature — that is, divested of every complication of mechanical and biological elements, as, for instance, an epidemic contagion or the suffocation of a man in a too compact crowd — is elementally “the influence of one brain upon another brain.”¹ Such an influence presupposes: (1) a model and a copy, that is to say, an idea which tends to reproduce itself by suggestion; and (2) an act of imitation by which the reproduction is accomplished. We have thus, on the one hand, the element owing to which social facts differ, namely, invention — the manifestation of creative genius in all its degrees, from which proceeds every improvement, however insignificant, in any kind of social phenomena, linguistic, religious, juridical, æsthetic; and we have, on the other hand, the element through which social facts repeat themselves, namely, imitation, in all its forms, forced and spontaneous, elective and unconscious.² In so far as imitation determines the repetitions and similitudes that exist in social life, it plays a part which is analogous to that of heredity in the living world and to that of undulation in the physical world.³ We must not confound the repetitions and similitudes which have their origin in imitation with those others which

¹ *Études pénales et sociales* (Lyons, 1892), p. 357: essay on “*Les maladies de l'imitation*.”

² *Lois de l'imitation* (Paris, 2d ed., 1895), pp. 2, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.

might be found among nations risen by separate ways to a certain degree of civilization. The latter are the result either of biological causes, such as the fundamental identity of human nature and of its organic wants, or of physical causes, such as the uniformity of the external *milieu*, by which like wants find like means of satisfaction.¹ All that in the phenomena of human aggregations is social and not vital bears the stamp of imitation, which, as M. Tarde says,

Est la pierre de touche la plus nette pour distinguer ce qui est social de ce qui est vital. Tout ce que l'homme fait sans l'avoir appris par l'exemple d'autrui, comme marcher, crier, manger, aimer même, dans le sens le plus grossier du terme, est purement vital; tandis que marcher d'une certaine façon, au pas gymnastique, valser, chanter un air, préférer à table certains plats de son pays et s'y tenir convenablement, courtoiser suivant le goût du jour une femme à la mode, tout cela est social.²

But what now is the law that determines the unequal and variable diffusion of inventions? Or, what amounts to the same: What is the law of imitation?

Tarde makes a distinction between logical and extra-logical laws of imitation. The logical laws are to be discovered whenever an invention is imitated solely because it is found to be truer or more useful than any of its competitors. There are inventions and discoveries that are destined by their reciprocal incompatibility to replace each other, and there are others that not only can coexist, but can be combined and accumulated. Hence we have in every order of social phenomena, from language to art, a double series of logical conflicts and logical copulations representing the two directions, critical and synthetic, through which is attained social progress, or, in Tarde's conception, "the ascent of human societies to the most intense energy of faith, and to the most nearly perfect equilibrium of appetites."³

The conflict arises at the appearance of a new invention, whenever this satisfies the same wants or has the same object

¹ Lois, pp. 40-46.

³ Lois, p. 160.

² Logique sociale (Paris, 1895), preface, pp. vi, vii.

as preceding inventions: in languages, between the accepted expression and the neologism; in religion, between the official dogma and the heretic creed; in science, between the ruling theory and the hypothesis of the new inquirers. The conflict terminates when one of the two contending elements has been eliminated. Union, or as Tarde puts it, "*l'accouplement logique*," is accomplished when the inventions in contact are, by their nature, capable of being combined and of reinforcing one another. We must discriminate between the inventions that can stand an indefinite superposition of others of the same nature and those which, beyond a certain limit of accumulation, have to yield to substitution should progress continue. The material of a language can be augmented without limit by the addition of new words responding to new ideas; but the grammar cannot be modified on its fundamental lines, beyond a certain limit, without profoundly impairing the organism of the language itself. Thus it is with the religious creeds: in them the narrative and legendary element, capable of infinite augmentation and development, is faced by the dogmatic and ritual element, which by its very nature is relatively unchangeable. Thus also science admits of unlimited accumulation, so far as the enumeration and classification of natural facts is concerned; whereas scientific theory is the most unyielding of human products, and the interpretation of facts *per causas* is perfected only by the substitution of new theories for old.¹

But the logical causes, as described above, very seldom operate apart from some other factor in the choice of examples to be imitated. Tarde formulates the following laws:

Examples of equal logical and teleological value being given:

1. *Internal are imitated before external models*, which means that the imitation of ideas precedes the imitation of their external manifestation, and that ends are imitated before means. A proof of this may be found in the fact that envy, *i.e.*, the desire of external imitation, never precedes obedience in the intercourse of the different social classes, but is always the sign and the consequence of an anterior obedience. In

being gradually attenuated, social inequalities become more unbearable to inferiors, cease to produce obedience — a form of internal imitation — and give birth to envy, which ends by completely eliminating the inequalities themselves. This law, according to which imitation proceeds *ab interioribus ad exteriora*, reproducing first the most intimate and hidden elements of the living model — aims and ideas — and then its exterior aspects, may explain why legislative reforms follow at a distance, without ever preceding, the intellectual and economic changes to which they correspond. The same law gives us the reason for the *survivances coutumières* in every kind of social facts, — linguistic, juridical, ritual, æsthetic, — showing us in these survivals the external imitation, that is, the imitation of expressions or means, outliving the disappearance of the internal model, namely, ends and ideas.¹

2. *The examples of persons and classes judged superior are imitated in preference to those of persons and classes reputed inferior.* Whatever may be the organization of a society, aristocratic, theocratic or democratic, imitation propagates from above to below, because the imitative intercourse is that of model to copy. This means that imitation is commonly unilateral. The idea of social preëminence is intimately connected with the fact of power and wealth. At all times and in every society the class which enjoys power and wealth is that from which examples descend to the lower classes. Of course invention may spring from the lower ranks of a society, but in order to spread out and to become an efficacious factor of progress, it must be received by the leading classes, "*cime sociale en haut-relief, sorte de château d'eau social d'où la cascade continue de l'imitation doit descendre.*" In connection with changes in social condition and with the diffusion of power and wealth from one class to another, the series of social preëminences develops itself in the line of historical evolution; and the center of imitative impulse gradually passes from the ancient theocracies to the aristocracy of blood, and later to the plutocracy, against which arises, to triumph in the future, the aristocracy

¹ Lois, pp. 211-232.

of the intellect. This law may explain the fascination that towns in general exercise over country-folk, and that the capital of a country has over other cities.¹

3. *An assumption of superiority makes conspicuous either ancestral models or those furnished by contemporaries.* This law is of the greatest importance to Tarde. Imitation develops itself in history in two directions: that of habit (*imitation-coutume*) and that of fashion (*imitation-mode*). These alternate during the life of human aggregations, without, however, permitting the spontaneous element of fashion to overthrow entirely the traditional element of habit, which is almost the warp into which the variations suggested by contemporary models weave themselves. The entire history of civilization may be divided into epochs of tenacious tradition, in which the imitation of ancestral models dominates, and epochs of invading fashion, in which the secular series of ideas and rules increases through the experience and the inventions of contemporaries. To each period of fashion succeeds one in which the recent acquisitions unite and become a definitive social patrimony through the formation of habits.² The alternation of these two modes of imitation cannot be clearly perceived by looking at human history in its entirety, because very seldom do the crises of foreign imitation occur simultaneously in the different fields of social activity. They appear now in the domain of language, now in that of politics, and again in that of literature and art. One cannot seize in detail the individual action of these two factors without studying separately each one of the various groups of facts in which the life of human societies is realized. Tarde proceeds to such a study in what concerns religion, politics, law, economy, ethics and art. This part³ of the *Lois de l'imitation*—a review of which cannot here even be attempted—is doubtless the most brilliant and the most suggestive portion of a work which is justly described as “fascinating” by so competent a critic as Professor Giddings.

¹ *Lois*, pp. 232–264.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 265–276.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 277–394.

II.

In *La logique sociale* Tarde endeavors to state the laws of invention. He says that it is impossible to understand how and why an invention is produced without taking into consideration, on the one hand, the mental activity of genius, and, on the other, the external causes. The latter consist principally of the various influences, linguistic, religious, economic, political and æsthetic, all of which operate in conformity to the logical and extra-logical laws of imitation, and lodge the elements of a future invention in the brain of a genius. The internal causes are to be sought, according to Tarde, in the mental activity of a genius.

Genius [says he], a very peculiar vital invention, is, at the same time, the highest blossom of life and the highest source of society. Without attempting to violate the secret of its solitary meditation, of that mysterious elaboration whence flow the sources of the social stream, one may say that genius consists in a mental conflict of judgments, or of ways of action, formerly believed to be connected, which now, for the first time, reveal their contradiction; or in a mental union of judgments, or of ways of action, till now considered unconnected, which suddenly disclose the possibility of mutual confirmation. In genius the tendency towards destructive criticism exists as well as the tendency toward inventive creation, but the former is ruled by the latter. Its critical spirit breaks the habitual links of thought only to utilize the fragments. What constitutes the most typical feature of genius is its aptitude to perceive the possibility of contradiction or of association among notions or rules till now considered as reënforcing or as eliminating each other.¹

Thus, in the mind of the inventor takes place the same conflict or the same union of aims and of ideas which arises in the mind of the imitator, and which causes the logical conflict or the logical union of imitations. The difference between the two cases is, that the feeling of the possibility of union or of conflict is only vague in the imitator's mind, especially in the first case, while the same feeling is most intense

¹ *Logique sociale*, pp. 166-173.

in the inventor's mind. Thus, whereas in the brain of an imitator the encounter of two inventions susceptible of association results only in an intensification of both, the same encounter, in a brain of genius, terminates in a new invention, a result of their combination.¹

Inventions and discoveries do not, however, follow one another at random: the order of their appearing is in general irreversible. From this point of view Tarde distinguishes the inventions that are capable of combining or of coexisting without damaging one another from those that are destined by incompatibility to a substitution of one for another. If the former should be found in an almost identical order among people of different nationalities which did not communicate with one another, the possibility of their appearing in an inverted order might still be conceivable. But the inventions of the second species appear to us in an irreversible series. Consequently we cannot conceive the possibility of the invention of the rifle before that of the arquebuse, or suppose the inversion of the inventions which bring us from the chariot of ancient days to the locomotive. The reasons for this irreversibility, says Tarde, are twofold: logical, that is, tending towards a systematization of inventions, and teleological, *lois du moindre effort*.²

How is the unification of different inventions accomplished in a society? By the same process, answers Tarde, by which every single invention is produced. The systematization of elementary inventions is nothing but a more complex invention, which is produced by the same alternation of conflicts and unions assumed by him to be the condition of social progress. The critical spirit, eliminator and purifier, and the inventive genius, constructor and accumulator, collaborate to create that nucleus of principles which we find in every developed society, and in which, under the different names of catechism, constitution, ethical and legal precepts, economic laws and æsthetic rules, we find what we could term a religious, a juridical, an industrial or other grammar. It is only after the grammar is

¹ *Logique sociale*, pp. 173, 174.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 180-185.

constituted in its typical features that the dictionary of any social institution can without limit increase through the accumulation of secondary inventions, assuming what Tarde calls the "grammatical livery," as, for example, legends conforming to dogma, facts explained by theory, sentences according to legislation and artistic productions responding to a dominating formula.¹

The same process of unification is accomplished in three separate phases. The first corresponds to that which in the brain of a single inventor precedes the birth of an invention. Inventions appear and propagate themselves in the still virgin social *milieu*, each in its own field, which is limited where the conflict arises or where the affinity with other inventions reveals itself. Then begins a second and most important period, in which are remarked both the contrasts and the possibilities of accumulation; and the work of unification begins. In the third period, the essential features of social institutions having been fixed by the unification of the various groups of inventions, the accumulation of secondary inventions begins. This is the epoch when the martyrology of a religion enriches itself and its theology develops into a subtile casuistry — the epoch in which the applications of a law or of a ruling scientific conception multiply until the moment when that progression is stayed by the shock of some greater new invention that turns the stream of imitation into another channel.²

While the different groups of inventions are organizing themselves, a more complex elaboration is gradually accomplished by the coördination of the groups themselves into a larger unity. Progressively the various social institutions and all the groups of men in which they are incarnated — all the organized and living powers of a society, factories, armies, convents, churches, academies, corporations of every kind — blend their dissonances into one superior harmony under the empire of one common ideal. Lastly, the national unification tends toward a system of nations, federations or gigantic empires, which represent the highest production of social dialectic. As Tarde expresses it :

¹ *Logique sociale*, pp. 192, 193

² *Ibid.*, pp. 193-195.

In the far distant past, perceived with difficulty but nevertheless appearing in glimpses, we discover embryos of nations, boroughs or villages scattered at great distances on a vast tract of uncultivated territory, resembling stars in the sky. These primitive communities had in the beginning as little intercourse with one another as France and Japan in the Middle Ages or as Rome and China in ancient times. However, this golden era of foreign politics does not last. The cities, in growing, draw nearer; they take up arms and fight, or unite to struggle against a common foe. This era of close and bloody or astute and insidious dialectic terminates only by dint of wars and alliances, conquests or annexations, when a vast empire is by this means created, portion by portion, resting at last, well ordained and peaceful in its uncontested power. The novel type of civilization born of this progressive union soon breeds and surrounds itself either with colonies, thus repeating and consolidating itself, or with examples of every kind that continue to enlarge the domain of its activity. . . . Such is the law of the normal development of nations, so often, however, interrupted by warlike catastrophes.¹

III.

Such is, in its prominent features, the sociological theory of Tarde — a theory far more interesting in its details and applications than will be supposed from the rough sketch which limits of space make necessary now. It seems difficult at first sight to determine how Tarde may have been brought to conceive its fundamental lines. Before him, imitation, although a matter of great familiarity to all, had usually been neglected, not only by sociologists, but even, as Professor Baldwin states, by psychologists. We find it superficially mentioned in one of the most suggestive works of Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, which can have been known to Tarde only in the French translation published in 1877,² when, it is to be supposed, the general outlines of his theory were already formed. Yet, on reflecting well, it is not really difficult to discover the point of departure in the formation of Tarde's theories. We possess evidence of

¹ *Logique sociale*, pp. 195, 196.

² In *Bibliothèque scientifique internationale*, Germer Baillière & Cie., éditeurs, Paris.

the greatest importance on this point in his first philosophical writing, an essay on *La croyance et le désir*, published in 1880 in Ribot's *Revue philosophique*. In this essay, which is particularly suited to reveal the typical features of Tarde's philosophical temperament, he endeavors to demonstrate the possibility of explaining all mental phenomena as incidental to the distribution of the raw material furnished by sensations into the two mental channels of *croyance* and *désir*, conceived as two Kant-like forms or schemes. Tarde adds that the appetitive power of the soul (*désir*) tends exclusively to the increase of belief (*croyance*), which constitutes the specific content of theoretical activity. Thus he is brought to give an absolute predominance to the intellectual or logical factor in mental development.

Certainty — the maximum of belief — is always the objective point of desire (*désir*). . . . Men must have passions . . . but why that summer heat if not to mature the fruits of the spirit — the ultimate conclusions, of whatever kind, in which a long life of turmoil finds its consummation? It is the same with peoples. From age to age knowledge accumulates and is added to the teaching of the senses, which themselves go on multiplying indefinitely through the growing diversity of life. But the passions, fortunately, are far from developing on a like scale; and if civilization multiplies our needs, it distributes among them only an equal or diminishing current of desire. A people among whom should prevail perfect security, unlimited credit and the most extensive and complete knowledge, would still of necessity labor, but would manifest little ambition, little emotion, save in respect to preserving their happy state; and for the precise reason that they would have reached the limit of all desire. Consider the hatreds, the ferocity, the vices that civilization destroys, the knowledge and the rights that it produces. On the other hand, the savage, uncontrolled and ignorant, a prey to unceasing doubt and disquiet, puts faith only in the teachings of his senses. . . . Such are the two extremes of history.¹

Here we find the germ of that conception whence will later develop the plan of the *Logique sociale*, in which Tarde

¹ *Essais et mélanges sociologiques* (Lyons, 1895), in which was included the paper cited above. See pp. 298, 299.

claims that the logical tendency to unification is the true organizing factor of social institutions and of social development. In connection with such views, Tarde advances the following proposition, containing, if I am not mistaken, the embryo of his sociological theory: "All social changes, small or great, spring ultimately from individual initiative, from fragments of more or less shattered personal projects."¹ It is hardly necessary to point out that such a conception is idealistic in character. It is a fact that the idea of human thought and human will as being the most essential factors of historical transformations is the corner-stone of that movement of speculation whence, in the middle of the eighteenth century, sprang the first attempts towards a scientific contemplation of human history. We find it at the basis of the so-called theory of the organic unity of the historical world, as first divined by Vico, taken up by Herder and his school, accepted by Goethe and the Romanticists, and afterwards developed in a more comprehensive synthesis by Georg Hegel.

But the Germans had ended by more and more identifying the unity revealed by historical groups with a transcendent and metaphysical entity. German idealism underwent a transformation in England, where, as Taine discerningly remarks, Thomas Carlyle gave his compatriots an English transcription of the German conceptions. By the mental habit of his race abhorring the vagueness of abstractions and of merely speculative data, the author of *Heroes and Hero Worship* was led to identify the unity of "historical species" with the concrete and living element, the "hero"—that is, to consider the historical species as the result of the action of a genius upon the social *milieu*, by means of which the unique type gradually develops itself from an original discordant multitude of separate and hostile groups—raw material on which the ideal model stamps its mark. Where the Germans place an "idea," Carlyle places a "hero." The fixed species of the German metaphysics is transfigured by the Anglo-Saxon brain into a concrete, almost a palpable, fact.

There was but one step from Carlyle's conception to Tarde's.

¹ *Essais et mélanges*, p. 307.

In the place of the "hero" Tarde sets "invention," meaning by that word any improvement whatsoever, traced back to an anterior innovation, in any kind of social phenomena. In his conception of the social process the power of transformation is attributed not only to genius, the appearance of which is to be considered as a revolutionary event, but to each idea, great or small, easy or difficult to conceive, which comes to life in the social *milieu*. In this view the action of genius appears to be a single manifestation of a more general law — namely, that ideas and inventions of every kind, no matter whether important or not, are causes of historical transformations.¹

In Tarde's theory the element of imitation appears to be a datum, furnished by biology, in support of this fundamental idealistic conception. It must not be forgotten that this theory was gradually outlined during the decade 1870-80, at a time when the great movement proceeding from Comte's positivism and Spencer's evolutionism was at its height. We must remember, moreover, that the dominating philosophy of that time was, by its very nature, forced to attenuate the importance of the mental factor in historical evolution. By not sufficiently appreciating the qualitative and specific difference between social and biological fact, that philosophy necessarily conceived progress and civilization as results of a fatalistic process, not unlike that through which the living organism grows from its cell. It is nevertheless true that the idea of the transmissibility of thought and of its consequent power to modify the social *milieu* was germinating with renewed vigor in that philosophy; for experimental psychology and mental pathology were beginning to reveal the miracles of hypnotism and suggestion. Doubtless the marvelous results of experimental research in mental biology must have suggested to Tarde the thought of turning the fact of imitation to account as a firm support for his idealistic conception of history. It is through hypnotism that Tarde succeeds in seizing the influence of one brain upon another brain, in which is revealed to him the true propagation of ideas in the social *milieu*.

¹ Lois, p. 3.

IV.

Such a combination of the merely biological datum of imitation with the Carlylian idealistic conception of history is effected in a crucible furnished by a polygenistic view of cosmical origins. Tarde emphatically denies the initial homogeneity postulated by Spencerian evolutionism, and asserts the plurality of the lines of development. "Evolution," he declares, "is not a single path, but a network of communicating roads (*voies anastomosées*)."¹ To a critic who accused him of being hostile to the true spirit of evolutionary philosophy, Tarde objected that the conception of a unilineal evolution is by Herbert Spencer's disciples arbitrarily made to pass as the only possible deterministic conception of transformation. One may deny, he observes, that that which is normal is uniform, and at the same time admit, in every order of phenomena, the necessity of a genesis by transformation.² This does not compel one to admit the intervention of a free will — of a free caprice, divine or human, upon which should depend the choice of a multiplicity of possible developments; for, as Tarde explains:

It suffices to believe in the heterogeneity and initial autonomy of the elements of the world — elements which contain potentialities that before their realization are unknown and profoundly unrecognizable, even to an infinite intelligence, but that, nevertheless, are realized and determined according to their own law, and project from the depths of being to the phenomenal surface true innovations, impossible to have been foreseen.³

Here it appears that Tarde understands evolution in the wide, vague sense of development from preëxisting principles — the *Entwicklung* of post-Kantian idealism. The scientific conception of evolution, in so far as it results from the analysis of single sciences, implies the principle of the persistence and convertibility of matter and motion, that is, of those two aspects of reality that constitute the termination of any possible inquiry. This assumption of the unity and identity of cosmical substance

¹ *Les transformations du droit* (Paris, 1894), p. iii.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Logique sociale*, p. 158.

excludes the possibility of multiple and heterogeneous substances. The scientific doctrine of evolution is essentially monistic ; and the initial heterogeneity presupposed by Tarde, in breaking the continuity of cosmic development, will doubtless find itself in open contrast with that doctrine.

Starting from a polygenistic conception of cosmic development, Tarde necessarily assumes the non-identity of social and biological phenomena, and regards their typical and differential elements as irreducible, so breaking the continuity of the phenomenal series. In these assumptions he finds the possibility of a general or "abstract" sociology, called to study the characteristic element of social facts apart from every other concurrent factor. This possibility has been repeatedly affirmed by Tarde, and the idea appears in the preface to the second edition of the *Lois de l'imitation*, where he declares it to have been his intention "*de dégager des faits humains leur côté sociologique pur, abstraction faite, par hypothèse, de leur côté biologique, inséparable pourtant du premier.*" Thus a distinction is presupposed between a general, or, as Tarde says, an "elementary" sociology — tending to establish the typical laws of society, independent of every concrete form whatsoever — and the particular social sciences, devoted to a study of the social organizations actually existing or having actually existed in the past. The antecedents of these dualistic conceptions must be looked for in Comte's classification, wherein the abstract, general and fundamental sciences, having as their object the discovery of laws in the various orders of phenomena, contemplated in all imaginable cases, are discriminated from the concrete, particular, secondary or descriptive sciences, consisting of accounts of the manifestations of those laws in objective reality.¹

It is useless to take up again the discussion of Comte's classification of the sciences or to repeat the reasons why Spencer's theory seems to be more acceptable and to respond better to the requirements of a monistic conception of the universe. It will be sufficient to adduce the acute and conclusive objections that Vanni, in one of his best works, raised against

¹ A. Comte, Cours de philosophie positive, leçon ii.

Comte's conception in its application to sociology.¹ Whence, argues Vanni, could the laws of general or "elementary" sociology be inferred, if not from the observation and comparison of the different societies that effectively have contributed and still contribute to human history? It is always a concrete existence that furnishes the data for scientific researches in the field of social phenomena. It is impossible to generalize without abstracting, that is, without gathering from the various single histories of human groups that which is common and essential to all. In this sense, however, abstraction is a mental process presupposed by every science, by every knowledge, by every idea, and accordingly cannot be assumed as the criterion of a classification of the sciences. Abstracting from merely accidental characters of a concrete group or aggregation is a very different matter from abstracting from the reality of the aggregation itself. By the latter method one could have mathematics or physics, but never a social science. The theory that asserts the possibility of an abstract science in the field of social phenomena confuses precisely these two different moments or aspects of the abstraction, and forgets that the basis of the classification ought to be objective. When one reflects that one can rise to the generalizations of sociology, that is, to laws, only after having viewed social life in its entirety, the essentially concrete nature of sociology appears to be incontestable. Vanni very justly observes that to claim that concrete sociology, namely, particular social sciences, ought to be founded on so-called "abstract" or general sociology, is to contradict the spirit of positive research. Is it history, then, that is founded on sociology, and not sociology on history? For these reasons we cannot agree with Tarde in admitting the possibility of a "pure" sociology, that is, of a sociology which does not take into consideration all the elements that we find in reality in social fact, but which assumes, as a matter of inquiry, only one element, mentally isolated from the whole.

Certainly the search after a typical and differential element

¹ Icilio Vanni (now Professor in the University of Bologna), *Prime linee d'un programma critico di sociologia* (Perugia, 1888), pp. 79. 80

of the social phenomenon is quite legitimate. We admit with Tarde the speciality of social in distinction from biological facts. Evolutionism, if kept within the limits of a relative and critical philosophy, cannot be interpreted as a system of universal identity. Evolution, being a change from homogeneity to heterogeneity, implies the process of differentiation. The difference does not arise *ex nihilo*: it is the product of anterior conditions, but cannot be identified with them. Consequently, the characteristic features of each new fact are not looked for in its antecedents. In every group of the cosmical series we find not only the essential elements of all anterior groups, but also the elements which specifically belong to the new group and not to any other. The fundamental problem of sociology does not consist in the investigation of the biological affinities of social facts, but in the determination of the conditions from which arises a new fact, not comprised in the merely biological phenomena. This analysis made by Tarde cannot by itself constitute a sociology either abstract or concrete, because the explanation of social facts, which is the only object of every sociological inquiry, cannot be attained without taking into consideration all the factors, physical, biological, historical, which in reality concur in determining social results. A separate analysis of these various factors is imposed by necessity of method—by a logical reason; but it is only to be admitted as a step, or preparatory measure, to a synthesis reproducing the real complexity of the phenomena. Not one of these single researches can stand by itself as an “abstract science,” because, as Vanni so justly remarks: “Abstraction, when assumed as a criterion of the classification of the sciences, must have an objective foundation.” In the case of sociology the abstraction from the physical and biological conditions of social fact can be conceived only as a subjective means of inquiry, while the concrete representation of the phenomena cannot be attained without reuniting the elements dispersed by analysis. Tarde’s theory, while limiting itself to the determination of the only typical element of social fact, mentally isolated, is not sociology: it is merely

a chapter of the new science, although extremely interesting and brilliantly conceived.

V.

The capital importance of the methodological problem in the present state of our science will account, it may be hoped, for the somewhat pedantic prolixity of the preceding discussion. It was absolutely necessary to eliminate any possible misapprehension in respect to the position taken by Tarde on such fundamental problems as those concerning the logical character of the science itself. We may now ask ourselves the question: Has Tarde succeeded in his purpose to determine the characteristic element of social fact?

After the splendid and unequalled studies of imitation by Professor Baldwin, one of the most prominent psychologists of our time, it is hardly possible to deny that, in pointing out the influence of imitation in social life, Tarde has made a real discovery, which is to be regarded as one of the greatest conquests of contemporary thought in the field of sociology. The Princeton professor, in his work on *Mental Development in the Child and the Race*,¹ brings, in support of Tarde's intuition, the best resources of experimental psychology. He generalizes and completes Tarde's statements, above all resolving and determining the limits of the fact of imitation; and then establishes, with subtile analysis, the origin and the mode of formation of the imitative instinct which Tarde has accepted as the point of departure of social intercourse. In the general biological law according to which every living being tends directly to secure the repetition or maintenance of useful *stimuli*, and the suppression of damaging or useless reactions, Professor Baldwin shows us in a masterful way the most profound and obscure manifestation of that force which, in its highest degree of development, becomes the plastic element of social aggregations, that is, the force by which is accomplished the transmission of thought from one individual to another within the limits of

¹ Second edition, 1897.

the same group, and from one generation to another in the course of time.

It is hardly necessary to remark that Professor Baldwin's conclusions not only support Tarde's theory, so far as imitation is concerned, but also indirectly justify his conception, as outlined in the *Logique sociale*, that the logical factor is the original cause of social organization; for imitation, proved by Professor Baldwin to be the permanent substratum of mental and social development, necessarily presupposes a model and a copy. This means that social intercourse must begin, just as Tarde claims, by being unilateral. This means also that leaders of every kind are the agents of social transformations through imitative instinct.

Whatever may have been the developments that Professor Baldwin, in his special and technical competence, has been able to give to Tarde's conceptions, it is nevertheless true, as Professor Baldwin loyally recognizes, that it is the French scholar who has the merit of being the first to point out the efficacy of the factor of imitation in social life. Tarde has revealed to us the means by which the transmission of the products of social activity is accomplished. This means had always been vague, uncertain and undetermined in the various sociological theories issued from the great womb of positive philosophy. The fundamental principle—true, legitimate, irrefutable—which underlies all those conceptions, is that of a movement, vesting and animating the life of human aggregations, forcing them from one condition to another, each connected with its antecedent by the subtle and hidden link of an intellectual continuity, a tradition of ideas, that is, a history. But none of those theories succeeded in formulating that vague intuition. The true and indisputable merit of Tarde consists in having solved the enigma of social dynamism.

VI.

This great soul of truth, which rigorous analysis discovers in Tarde's speculations, is so fitted to become an active ferment of advancement in social science, that it deserves to be purified

from metaphysical decay. In other terms, we must carefully separate the sociological conception of Tarde from its metaphysical background by bringing it within the limits of strictly scientific philosophy. Whatever the discoverers of the so-called *banqueroute de la science* may think, it is nevertheless true that by the means of positive research human thought has best succeeded in tearing down the greater part of the veil which hides from us the mystery of universal life.

It is above all necessary to eliminate the neo-Leibnitzian conception of cosmical origins to which Tarde is becoming more and more attached, as is shown in the essay on *Monadologie et sociologie*,¹ judged by the author himself to be a "metaphysical revel," and by his recent volume on the *Opposition universelle*.² It is quite possible to admit the truth of Tarde's sociological conception, based on imitation and on the predominance of logical factors, without therefore being compelled to agree with Tarde's polygenistic view of cosmical origins. Polygenism, however, if divested of the Leibnitzian involucrum, which includes the existence of heterogeneous substances and breaks the continuity of the phenomenal series, can be perfectly harmonized with the monistic philosophy, on the condition that the many centers of human procreation and social development be conceived as the results of the same causes, operating with a different degree of intensity.

But polygenism, thus conceived, is not in contradiction with the Spencerian law of progressive differentiation.. Whatever may be the conditions in which the growth of social aggregations is accomplished, whatever may be the difference in the degrees of development owing to the different intensity of inventive energy and imitative instinct in each, it is true that the multiplicity of human aggregations that Tarde perceives in the origins of history shows an undeniable homogeneity in the inferiority of conditions whence each advances to its destinies. The difference, and in several instances the divergence, of the lines of development from the common lower level begins with

¹ *Essais et mélanges*, p. 309.

² *L'opposition universelle: essai d'une théorie des contraires* (Paris, 1897).

the appearance of such a degree of mental activity (invention) as renders possible the gradual and, in some respects, voluntary transformation of the conditions of life. Thus, while the homogeneity of mental inferiority is found at the origin of history, the progressive differentiation produces itself in the course of evolution through invention. The progressive unification, opposed by Tarde to the Spencerian law of differentiation, ends in a differentiation of the highest degree. Through the assimilation and the absorption of minor groups — families, tribes, cities — into more complex unities, invention by its progressive manifestations marks the advance of difference.

After eliminating the metaphysical interpretation of Tarde's polygenism, it is the duty of critics to remove all ambiguity from his conception of the predominance of logical factors in social development, as outlined in his *Logique sociale*. This means the necessity of determining, with rigorous analysis, the interdependence of the logical or intellectual and the other concurrent physical and biological factors of social life. An effective essay in this direction has been made by Professor Giddings in his *Principles of Sociology*.¹

As a great admirer and a faithful disciple of Gabriel Tarde, I would, in concluding this summary sketch of his sociological theories, express the hope that the conceptions of the French master may be the germ destined to be developed by the work of scholars who, like Professors Giddings and Baldwin, still remain true to the spirit of positive and scientific philosophy. Tardian sociological theory — if reconnected with scientific monism — does not give to social fact the character of an explosion, interrupting the continuity of the evolutionary process; does not show it as something extraneous, in its deepest roots, to biological activity; but exhibits it as a development of biological factors, combined in a product of a superior order. For the domination of social naturalism, inaugurated by careless interpreters of Herbert Spencer, Tardian theory, if purified of its metaphysical surroundings, might substitute a determinism

¹ F. H. Giddings, *The Principles of Sociology* (New York, The Macmillan Co., 1896).

connected with an ideal aim, set forth by inventors as the proper means to transform and to ameliorate the conditions of social existence. In recognizing that thought, in general, and the impulse proceeding from it, can, like the forces of nature, spread by way of imitation, be transmitted, be communicated, now remaining concealed, now being revived, now being multiplied in virtue of their concentration, Tarde restores to the ideal factor its true value in the progressive renovation of social conditions, and opens for us the way to understand the possibility of the most radical transformations in social conditions, thus restoring in our souls the faith in the destinies of humanity, and in its progressive ascension "above the plane of physical necessity into the freer air of liberty and light."¹

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¹ Giddings, *op. cit.*, p. 422.